



## **Why Attorneys Should Be Working with the Press Instead of Against Them**

**By Paramjit Mahli**

You know that public relations is an important aspect of your business development strategy, but do you know the appropriate plan of action to take in order to achieve optimal success?

Solo practitioners and attorneys from small law firms often resist public relations. They cite not having enough time, a lack of understanding of its role, or the dearth of resources to make public relations part of their business development plans. Coupled with stereotypes of the press, such as reporters only going to the big law firms or only wanting the drama and not the facts, it's no surprise that media relations is relegated to the bottom of business development activities, particularly if the firm has already achieved some "visibility" that did not result in new clients.

The reality is that public relations is an indispensable part of business development strategy for every firm, regardless of size. Getting quoted in news stories, both in targeted industry publications and mainstream media, is one of the most cost-effective ways of securing exposure. A good public relations plan serves several purposes: it builds reputation and visibility; allows firms, practice areas and solo practitioners to become known, liked and trusted in their target market; and finally—and most importantly— helps to bring more business.

Before embarking on a public relations plan, you must ensure that all of the firm's marketing communications materials, such as blogs, Web sites, newsletters and e-zines, address the "What's in it for me" question for prospects and that differentiation is clear. The next step is to target the industry publications and media outlets that your target market reads.

Whether you're a firm that is working with public relations consultants or implementing the plan with internal resources, or you're a solo practitioner implementing it on your own, the following considerations will make your media relations plan a lot more focused and effective.

1. Who are my clients? What do they read? Do they read online publications? Knowing the answers to these questions will guide your choices of the publications to target, whether they are local dailies, weeklies, magazines or trade/professional journals. While being quoted in The New York Times is prestigious, it's meaningless if your target market doesn't read that publication. There are attorneys who want media exposure for personal reasons, but often this is in direct conflict with the targeted media relations campaign.
2. Conduct an audit of your expertise. What areas of expertise do you have that are frequently the focus of news stories? This will help you identify reporters who cover your area of expertise and build relationships with them. Reporters are constantly on the lookout for attorneys who can simplify legislation; knowing who covers your area of expertise will help position you as a source. For example, if your area of expertise is



workplace discrimination in the financial services industry, getting to know reporters who cover this beat is key.

3. Know what reporters have been covering in your areas of expertise. There is nothing worse than pitching a story that has already been covered. Not only is it embarrassing, but it also demonstrates to the reporter that you or your public relations team has not done the homework. It is a sure way of lessening your credibility with that reporter.
4. Don't overlook changes or emerging trends in your practice area. These offer golden opportunities to be quoted or to provide commentary. Once you have built those relationships, you can send reporters a quick e-mail or call them, alerting them to possible stories.
5. Too often opportunities on the Op-Ed pages are overlooked. Writing an Op-Ed piece is a good way of getting to know the editor and bringing to light an issue that is affecting your target market. Letters published in Op-Ed pages can result in story ideas for reporters.
6. Depending on your targeted publication, you can pitch Q&As and stories on pitfalls to avoid, such as the top 10 mistakes to avoid when friends become partners in business ventures or top 10 mistakes to avoid when negotiating a severance package. Even if your story submissions are overlooked, every couple of months, with the permission of the reporter, continue to send him story ideas. Reporters/producers/guest bookers all keep background information on topics that they cover.
7. Don't overlook the importance of becoming a resource for the reporter; this is where you provide background information. While you may not be quoted immediately, opportunities will continue to come your way. Reporters tend to have long memories; they know who is a valuable and trustworthy source. The busier they are, the more premium they place on their sources. Becoming a resource goes a long way toward building relationships with reporters.
8. Consider inviting reporters to any Continuing Legal Education training/seminars that the firm may be offering. By extending the invitation, make certain that the seminar is in an area that the reporter is interested in.
9. Monitor editorial calendars regularly. Many publications have their calendar online. An editorial calendar is a valuable tool for gauging what a publication plans to cover throughout the year, and helps you avoid missed opportunities. It gives attorneys and law firms plenty of time to remind reporters that they are available to be quoted and provides time to craft and submit story ideas.
10. Know when to say no to the press. Reporters may be focusing on stories that will be detrimental to your target market. In such circumstances, it is prudent to give reporters a couple of other sources from whom they can obtain a quote. Whether or not an attorney wants to be quoted in such a story, it is still imperative to return the phone call in a timely manner.

## SCG Legal PR Network

*Connecting legal experts as sources with journalists*



Becoming known as an expert in one or more areas is only part of the equation; the other part is leveraging these opportunities successfully into other marketing activities. Articles, columns and/or bylines written by attorneys can be sent to prospects, strategic alliances and clients with the view of providing value, rather than circulating them with the intent of getting the attorney known. All published or sourced works can be included in newsletters and e-zines. They can be used as a basis for a speech or presentation to your target audience. And they should be added to your Web site.

Finally, it is absolutely imperative to recognize and understand that building credibility and visibility does not happen overnight and rarely does it reap immediate results. It may take a nanosecond to destroy a reputation, but to build one takes work, effort and commitment from all the decision makers in the firm. However, with a sustained campaign working in conjunction with other marketing activities, public relations will reap huge dividends.

### **About the Author**

Paramjit L. Mahli is the founder of the award-winning SCG Legal PR Network, a service that connects legal experts with reporters nationally and internationally. Mahli has worked in communications for 18 years, with experience in journalism, public relations and teaching in the U.S. and abroad.

Before she started SCG Legal PR Network, Mahli worked as a producer and reporter for international and domestic news organizations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Financial Post, CNN, CNNfn and The Journal of Commerce, and she spent the last decade consulting law firms on PR and marketing.

Mahli is also Co-Chair of the Communications Committee of the New York Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA). She also frequently writes for TechnoLawyer and teaches CLEs and teleseminars on topics such as connecting legal experts with reporters, training associates, crisis communication and social media. Ms. Mahli can be reached at [pmahli@scglegalprnetwork.com](mailto:pmahli@scglegalprnetwork.com).

### **About SCG Legal PR Network**

SCG Legal PR Network is a global network that connects lawyers as expert sources with reporters and features a 24/7-accessible database of legal experts from a variety of areas. Its team is comprised of former award-winning journalists whose experience spans over three continents and 30-plus years of experience in the field of journalism and public relations. For more information about the SCG Legal PR Network, please call 212-661-9137 or visit SCG Legal PR Network's Web site at <http://www.scglegalprnetwork.com>.